
ANSWERING ENGLISH LITERATURE QUESTIONS

Advice on tackling
typical questions with
specimen answers

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MA(Oxon), Dip. Ed.

Answering English Literature Question

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with specimen answers**

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Answering English Literature Questions

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First examinations

As You Like It
A Midsummer Night's Dream
King Henry IV Part One
Julius Caesar
Twelfth Night
She Stoops to Conquer
Pygmalion
Great Expectations
'The Solitary Reaper'
'The Dead'
'Bavarian Gentians'
'Felix Randell'
'Evans'
'Michael'
The Poems of Wilfred Owen
Northanger Abbey
'Morte d'Arthur'
'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

} William Shakespeare

Oliver Goldsmith
George Bernard Shaw
Charles Dickens
William Wordsworth
Rupert Brooke
D.H. Lawrence
Gerard Manley Hopkins
R.S. Thomas
William Wordsworth

Jane Austen
Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Advanced examinations

Miscellany One and Miscellany Two
'Sunk Lyonesse'
The New Men

Dylan Thomas
Walter de la Mare
C.P. Snow

NB I have considered it more helpful to spread the lower level questions over a number of texts but to concentrate the advanced level questions on two books only, which have thus been studied in some depth.

Preface

During my thirty-six years' experience as a GCE examiner at O and A levels, it has become abundantly clear to me that a great many candidates in English Literature are sent into the examination room with only the haziest idea, sometimes no idea at all, of what is required of them in attempting to answer the questions. This must be because the teacher either does not know or has failed to impart this knowledge to the candidates.) In either case help is needed. Often far more attention seems to have been paid by the candidate to the introduction to a set book than to the text itself and, whatever questions may be asked, large undigested chunks of the introduction will appear in the answers, whether relevant (which is rare) or not.

It is obviously impossible to cover every text which has been, or might be, prescribed. A selection of frequently-set Shakespeare plays will be found here, including a history, a tragedy and some of the best-known comedies; there are also an eighteenth-century comedy, various anthologies of poetry, a Shaw play, novels by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens and another by one of our foremost contemporary writers, the late C.P. Snow. All these provide a wide range of examples and questions of every type have been answered on them. Candidates studying different plays, poems and novels should not find it too difficult to apply the techniques used in these answers, and summarized at the end of each section, to their own prescribed texts. It would be a very useful form of revision to try, for example, to give an account of a scene or two from their own plays, or to 'appreciate' a poem, closely following the methods set out in this book.

It may be that the teacher over-estimates the ability of pupils to comprehend such matters as the weighting of the different parts of a question. It is necessary to grasp whether these parts are of equal importance and likely to be equally marked or whether the first part is obviously far more demanding and thus likely to be awarded most of the total marks, while the rest of the question, which can, perhaps, be answered fully in two or three sentences, does not merit more than a few marks. To the teacher reading the question this is so evident that it may not occur to him to point out possibility in advance to his pupils. However, the less able candidates need to be taken through question after question from old

papers and to be instructed in the technique of answering them. They need explanations of exactly what these questions involve, how they are to be tackled, how much illustration is expected and so on. Even the meaning of a phrase which appears year after year in questions on set plays, 'by quotation from or close reference to the text' is frequently misunderstood and whole speeches from Shakespeare's plays or dozens of lines of *Paradise Lost* are written out in full, whereas it is the candidate's ability to select just the appropriate line or two to support the point being made that is being tested. 'Close reference' to the text means just what it says, a constant pointing to the actions and words, perhaps only a single word, of the characters to substantiate the view the candidate is propounding.

It is not much good just saying that Macbeth is brave, it is necessary to prove this by describing his brave actions or quoting his brave words or telling how other people praised his bravery or doing all three. 'Quotation' demands the exact words of the text, 'close reference', the candidate's reproduction of the speech or scene in his or her own words, though keeping as near to the original as possible, so that an echo of it can be heard underlying the reproduced version. Without a good deal of practice at this sort of thing during their preparation, most candidates are not going to be able to produce spontaneously what is required when the time comes, in examinations at any level.

I do not suppose I should have ventured upon producing this book if I had not received a great many requests from teachers to do so. But I am left in no doubt that there is a crying need for authoritative guidance on the technique of answering Literature questions and many students too are now asking for this sort of help. Neither the expert, experienced teacher nor the really able candidate will, obviously, have the slightest need of such assistance as is here provided. The book is not intended for them but for teachers doubtful of their own ability because of lack of experience or a history of poor results, and for students who feel they are not getting the help they need in class.

The specimen answers given here are not those which a professor of English, or even an undergraduate, might be expected to write but those which a good candidate of 16 or 18 years old could produce. Indeed the answers have, to a large extent, been produced by pupils in schools or colleges of further education, with whom I have discussed the questions thoroughly and whose views I have accepted for purposes of this book, regardless of my own opinions. The vocabulary used is often theirs, not mine, and I have resisted the temptation to make it more scholarly. The

sentence construction is sometimes clumsy but it is their own or very near to their own. Sometimes the present tense is preferred, sometimes the past.

The length of some of the answers may surprise some teachers. Careful tests have shown that they can all be written comfortably in the allotted time. They are long enough to include all the requirements of the question but not longer than that.

There are as many ways of answering a question as there are hands to write. The last thing I intend is that the answers which follow (except in the case of context questions, which are mainly factual) should be taken as models of what is correct and that, therefore, anything which differs from them is wrong.

A study of them will, however, show candidates how other students at the same age and stage have tackled the sort of Literature questions that they will, themselves, encounter. The selection of texts used here is a comparatively irrelevant matter; it is the method of dealing with the questions that is important and, once grasped, the method can be applied to answering questions on any text, whatever the students' views may be. However, in order to make answers more meaningful to candidates unfamiliar with the texts, introductory explanatory notes have been included whenever it seemed they might be helpful.

Candidates who wish to broaden their study of literature beyond the prescribed set books might well try to read for themselves some of the plays, poems and novels referred to in this book. For the Shakespeare plays I recommend the Macmillan Shakespeare edition, where straight-forward, helpful introductions and informative and easily understood notes are to be found, and many of the other texts mentioned can be obtained from the same publisher.

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1 Context Questions

INTRODUCTION

Briefness and accuracy are the two qualities required in answering context questions. Many candidates have obviously been taught that they must write a complete sentence in answer to each section. This is often quite unnecessary and it is time-wasting and irritating to the examiner. It is also very important to give only the information asked for; no marks will be awarded for any irrelevant matter.

QUESTIONS FOR FIRST EXAMINATIONS

AS YOU LIKE IT

EXPLANATORY NOTE

Rosalind, an orphan, has been brought up at the court of her uncle, Duke Frederick, who has overthrown the rightful ruler, her father and his brother, Duke Senior. Celia, Duke Frederick's motherless daughter, loves Rosalind dearly and the two girls have been brought up together, like sisters. Duke Senior is living in the nearby Forest of Arden with those of his courtiers who remain loyal to him, including the melancholy Jaques.

Near to the court live the three De Boys brothers, also orphans. The eldest, Oliver, hates the next one, Orlando, and treats him worse than he would a servant, though the youngest brother, another Jaques, is being well-educated and cared for. Oliver even goes so far as to plot Orlando's murder by persuading Charles, the court wrestler, to kill him, as if accidentally, during a wrestling-match.

When he goes to the court for the match, Orlando meets Rosalind and they fall in love at first sight. Oliver's plan miscarries as Orlando overthrows Charles but, in spite of his victory, he is warned that the Duke dislikes him and may harm him. As he cannot expect any protection from Oliver, he and his father's faithful old servant, Adam, decide to escape to the Forest of Arden.

Meanwhile at court the disagreeable Duke Frederick has turned against Rosalind too, thinking that she is more popular with the people than his own daughter and, ignoring Celia's prayers, he orders her to go into banishment

immediately. Celia insists on accompanying her and so does the faithful court jester, Touchstone, who is later to have many arguments with the melancholy Jaques, and they steal away secretly to seek Rosalind's father in the Forest. For their safety, the girls disguise themselves as peasants, Rosalind as a boy, Ganymede, and Celia as 'his' supposed sister, Aliena.

Both Rosalind and Orlando leave with heavy hearts, wondering if they will ever see each other again but they are soon to meet in the Forest. Rosalind, of course, at once recognizes Orlando who, with Adam, has joined Duke Senior and his followers but he believes her to be the peasant boy she appears and tells 'him' the story of his lost love. Rosalind pretends to be able to cure him of his painful love-sickness and so cleverly brings it about that they meet frequently.

Rosalind and Celia make friends with some shepherds, a young man, Silvius, who is deeply in love with the scornful, unyielding Phebe, and old Corin. Phebe, believing Rosalind to be a boy, falls in love with 'him'.

Meanwhile Duke Frederick has sent Oliver to find and bring back Rosalind and Celia, under threat of death if he is unsuccessful. He is nearly killed by a lion in the Forest but is rescued just in time by Orlando and consequently has a complete change of heart and becomes a loving brother to Orlando and, eventually, Celia's bridegroom.

Phebe in due course discovers Rosalind's true sex and so consents to marry Silvius, and Orlando finds out who Rosalind really is and marries her. Duke Frederick, like Oliver, repents of all his previous wickedness and restores the dukedom to Duke Senior, now re-united with his daughter, so everything ends happily.

Context (a) shows Celia pleading with her father not to banish Rosalind.

(b) is part of a description of Touchstone given by the melancholy Jaques to Duke Senior.

In (c) Orlando is asking Rosalind for the cure for his love-sickness which she pretends her uncle, a magician, taught her.

(d) is Rosalind's advice to Phebe to accept Silvius's proposal.

QUESTION

Choose three of the following passages (a) — (d) and answer briefly the questions which follow.

(a) I did not then entreat to have her stay;
It was your pleasure and your own remorse.
I was too young that time to value her;
But now I know her; if she be a traitor,
Why so am I.

- (i) Who is speaking and to whom? Who is the 'traitor'?
- (ii) Explain: 'It was your pleasure and your own remorse'.
- (iii) How does the person addressed justify his action?
- (iv) Briefly refer to another instance of his tyranny.

- (b) And then he drew a dial from his poke,
And, looking, on it with lack-lustre eye,
Says very wisely, 'It is ten o'clock;
Thus may we see,' quoth he, 'how the world wags'.
- Who is speaking? Whom is he describing?
 - In your own words conclude this little sermon on Time.
 - What ambition is awakened in the speaker as a result of this meeting in the forest?
 - How does Duke Senior express his disapproval of this ambition?
- (c) Orlando. 'I am he that is so loved-shaked. I pray you, tell me your remedy.'
Rosalind. 'There is none of my uncle's marks upon you: he taught me how to know a man in love; in which cage of rushes I am sure you are not prisoner.'
- Explain the reference to 'my uncle'.
 - Instance **three** of the marks of a lover as Rosalind goes on to describe them.
 - What is her remedy for love?
 - Explain 'cage of rushes'.
- (d) But, mistress, know yourself; down on your knees,
And thank heaven, fasting, for a good man's love;
For I must tell you friendly in your ear
Sell when you can; you are not for all markets.
- Who is speaking and to whom?
 - Who is the 'good man' and how, according to the speaker, does he show his love? How has his love been received?
 - Explain the last line.
 - What is the effect of this speech upon the person to whom it is addressed?

ANSWER

- (a) (i) Celia is speaking to her father, Duke Frederick.
The 'traitor' is Rosalind.
- (ii) You allowed her to stay of your own free will from a feeling of **compassion**.
- (iii) He tells Celia that Rosalind is cleverly deceiving her and by her uncomplaining **submission** is **appealing** to the people who feel sorry for her and **esteem** her more than

they do the Duke's own daughter. When Celia has no longer to compete with Rosalind, her good qualities will be more easily recognized.

- (iv) When the Duke discovers that Orlando is missing he sends for Oliver, who has no knowledge of his brother's whereabouts, and tells him that unless he produces Orlando, alive or dead, within a year, he will be exiled and all his possessions confiscated.

(b) (i) Jaques is describing Touchstone.

- (ii) An hour ago it was nine o'clock and in another hour's time it will be eleven. So, as the hours pass, we come to maturity and then begin to decline.

There is more that could be said on this subject.

- (iii) To become a jester.

- (iv) By telling Jaques that he would do wrong to find fault with others for, having been a dissolute sinner himself, he might well as a result of his former evil life, corrupt rather than reform.

(c) (i) Rosalind has explained her refined accent to Orlando by telling him that an old rebellious uncle of hers taught her to speak.

- (ii) 'A lean cheek', a 'blue eye and sunken', 'a beard neglected'.

- (iii) She suggests to Orlando that he should pretend that she was his beloved and should come every day to court her. She would then behave in such a maddeningly inconsistent way towards him that he should become sickened by her moods and vagaries and would wish to find refuge in retirement in some secluded place.

- (iv) Rosalind is likening a man in love to a caged bird which has lost its freedom. A bird cage in Shakespeare's time would be made of basket-work, interwoven rushes or osiers.

(d) (i) Rosalind is speaking to Phebe.

- (ii) Silvius is the good man, who follows Phebe, 'like foggy south puffing with wind and rain' and flatters her into having far too high an opinion of herself. Phebe has rejected his love cruelly and insultingly, showing her proud and ruthless disposition.

- (iii) Marry while you have the opportunity, it is not everyone who would be likely to make you an offer.

- (iv) Phebe falls in love with the disguised Rosalind and tells her she would rather listen to her scolding than to Silvius's protestations of love.

NB All four parts of the question have been answered here, although only three are asked for in the question.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

EXPLANATORY NOTE

There are three threads in the complicated plot of this play, which is set in Athens in ancient times. The Duke, Theseus, is about to be married to Queen Hippolyta and some rough working-men, led by Nick Bottom, a weaver, are preparing a play which they hope will be chosen to be acted before the wedding-guests. In order to keep their plans secret, they rehearse at night in the forest outside Athens.

This forest is the home of fairies, whose King and Queen, Oberon and Titania, are quarrelling bitterly over a little Indian boy adopted by Titania, who is, in Oberon's view, occupying far too much of her time and attention. He devises a plan to put matters right and sends his mischievous little servant, Puck, to fetch a flower, the juice of which has magic properties. He proposes to smear the juice on the sleeping Titania's eyes. This will cause her to fall in love with the first creature she sees when she awakes. Oberon will then at once kidnap the Indian boy and after that take the spell off Titania with some different juice, so that she will once more love her husband wholeheartedly.

Puck chances upon Bottom and his friends rehearsing their play and, seizing a moment when Bottom is alone, he pops a sort of donkey-mask over his head. Bottom doesn't know quite what has happened to him and his friends are terrified at his changed appearance and run away, screaming. Blundering about in the darkness, the bewildered Bottom wakes Titania who immediately adores him. Oberon takes away the Indian boy and then frees Titania from the spell as planned, so that she loves him again and loathes the sight of poor Bottom who, after Puck has taken off his ass's head, makes his way back to his friends, just in time for the choosing of the play for the wedding entertainment.

Besides all this excitement going on in the forest, four young Athenian lovers are also out there that night. Hermia and Lysander are eloping because Hermia's father, Egeus, won't let them be married; Demetrius, who is favoured by Egeus, is pursuing them in the hope of marrying Hermia himself and Helena, who loves Demetrius, is tagging along behind on the chance of being thrown a kind word by Demetrius. Oberon tries to make all four happy by using his magic juice to cause Demetrius to stop loving Hermia and love Helena instead, but Puck puts the juice on Lysander's eyes by mistake and great complications result from this till, at last, Oberon is able to put things

right and the play ends with the wedding, not only of Duke Theseus and Queen Hippolyta but also of Lysander and Hermia and Demetrius and Helena.

Bottom's entertainment is, of course, chosen to be performed at the party afterwards. This play is the harrowing story of a young lover, Pyramus and his beloved, Thisbe, who have to meet in secret by night because of Thisbe's father's objection to their marriage. Thisbe arrives first at their meeting-place but is frightened away by a lion, dropping her cloak as she runs off. The lion chews the cloak with blood-stained jaws, so that when Pyramus arrives and finds it, he believes Thisbe has been eaten by the lion and, overcome with grief, kills himself. Thisbe then bravely returns and, seeing her lover lying dead, stabs herself to death with his sword. Bottom plays the part of Pyramus and, of course, the play should produce an effect both thrilling and sorrowful but, as acted by Bottom and his friends, the only sort of tears it is likely to cause are tears of laughter.

In context (a) Helena is thinking aloud about the mysteries of love and the reason for Demetrius's preferring Hermia to her.

(b) is part of Puck's description to the fairy King Oberon of the terrified flight of Bottom's friends when they first see him wearing the ass's head and tells how, for fun, he deliberately added to their bewilderment and fear.

In (c) Theseus is telling his bride that he cannot accept as the truth the four lovers' hazy recollections of what happened to them the previous night in the forest.

(d) is also Theseus talking to Hippolyta, this time about his choice of play for their wedding entertainment. She expects to be bored by the efforts of Bottom and his friends and he is explaining why he has selected their play from all the others offered.

QUESTION

Choose three of the passages (a) — (d) and answer briefly the questions that follow them:

(a) *Helena* Things base and vile, holding no quantity
Love can transpose to form and dignity;
Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind,
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind.
Nor hath love's mind of any judgment taste;
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste;
And therefore is Love said to be a child,
Because in choice he is so oft beguil'd.

- (i) State what happens immediately before this speech.
- (ii) Give the meaning in this passage of 'figure' and 'beguil'd'.
- (iii) Put line 5 into your own words.
- (iv) What light does this passage throw upon the character of the speaker?

(b) So, at this sight, away his fellows fly,
 And, at our stamp, here o'er and o'er one falls;
 He murder cries, and help from Athens calls.
 Their sense thus weak, lost with their fears thus
 strong,
 Made senseless things begin to do them wrong;
 For briers and thorns at their apparel snatch;
 Some sleeves, some hats, from yielders all things
 catch.
 I led them on in this distracted fear,
 And left sweet Pyramus translated there.

- (i) Who is the speaker and to whom is the speech addressed?
- (ii) State what happened immediately after this speech.
- (iii) Give the meaning in this passage of 'from yielders all things catch'.
- (iv) Express in your own words the meaning of line 4.
- (v) In what way had Bottom been 'translated'?

(c) **Theseus** More strange than true. I never may believe
 These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
 Lovers and madmen have such seething brains
 Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
 More than cool reason ever comprehends.
 The lunatic, the lover, and the poet,
 Are of imagination all compact.

- (i) To whom is the speech addressed?
- (ii) State what happens immediately before this speech.
- (iii) Give the meaning of 'fairy toys' and 'compact'.
- (iv) Put lines 4 and 5 into your own words.
- (v) Say briefly what choice Theseus has to make soon after he says these words, and what decision he comes to.

(d) Trust me, sweet,
 Out of this silence yet I picked a welcome
 And in the modesty of fearful duty
 I read as much as from the rattling tongue
 Of saucy and audacious eloquence.
 Love, therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity
 In least speak most, to my capacity.

- (i) Who is the speaker and to whom is the speech addressed?
- (ii) State what happens immediately before this speech.
- (iii) Give the meaning of 'in the modesty of fearful duty'.
- (iv) Express in your own words what is meant by line 7.

- (v) What light does the whole passage throw upon the character of the speaker?

ANSWER

- (a) (i) Hermia and Lysander have told Helena of their secret intention to run away from Athens together on the following night because of the refusal of Egeus, Hermia's father, to allow their marriage.
- (ii) 'Figure' means 'symbolise' or 'represent', 'beguil'd' means 'tricked'.
- (iii) Nor has Cupid's brain any ability to discriminate.
- (iv) We see here Helena's romantic nature and her vanity in assuming that, if Cupid were more discriminating, she would be preferred to Hermia by Demetrius.
- (b) (i) Puck is speaking to Oberon.
- (ii) Demetrius and Hermia entered. He was pleading for her love and she was bitterly rejecting him and accusing him of killing Lysander.
- (iii) Everything is readily given up (by those who are too frightened to safeguard their possessions).
- (iv) The extremity of their terror causes them to lose their heads completely.
- (v) Puck has disguised him by placing an ass's head over his own.
- (c) (i) Hippolyta.
- (ii) Hippolyta has commented on the mysterious nature of the account the four Athenian lovers have given of their experiences in the forest.
- (iii) 'Fairy toys' means 'fanciful stories about fairies' and 'compact' means 'composed'.
- (iv) Such imaginative powers capable of giving shape to things that have no real existence, which conjure up more than can ever be grasped by the exercise of sober rational thought.
- (v) Theseus has to choose one of the four possible entertainments selected by Philostrate to be performed at the Wedding Feast. He chooses 'A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe; very tragical mirth' offered by Bottom and the other 'Mechanicals'.
- (d) (i) Theseus is speaking to Hippolyta.